Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

In June 1853 the Boston-based Carrier Pigeon, a clipper ship on her maiden voyage, was torn apart by a fog-blanketed rock off Whale Point. Thereafter, it was called Pigeon Point.

California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should contact the park at (650) 879-2120. This publication can be made available in alternate formats. Contact interp@parks.ca.gov or call (916) 654-2249.
Perched where coast and ocean meet, the lighthouse at Pigeon Point Light Station State Historic Park beckons motorists traveling Highway 1. They can’t miss the stately 115-foot structure, the tallest operating lighthouse on the West Coast. Pigeon Point Light Station is listed on the National Register of Historic Places—a reminder of the days when whalers and Gold Rush era clipper ships fought gales, stiff seas, jagged coastal rocks and unforgiving fog.

THE POINT’S COLORFUL PAST

Pigeon Point’s original name, Whale Point, was inspired by the gray whales that migrate past the point. California’s boom from gold rush to statehood brought many ships to these rugged waters. In June 1853 the Boston-based Carrier Pigeon, on her maiden voyage, ran aground off Whale Point (later renamed Pigeon Point in honor of the ship).

Between 1865 and 1868, three major shipwrecks affirmed the danger of this fog-blanketed location. Finally, in November 1872, a lighthouse was built with a light and fog signal that guided mariners for more than a century.

The lighthouse was outfitted with the most powerful lens of the day—a first-order (the largest) Fresnel lens. Perched in a glass-enclosed room at the top of the lighthouse, the lens stands 16 feet tall and weighs four tons. Its designer, French physicist Augustin Jean Fresnel, used 1,008 handcrafted, brass-framed lenses and prisms to concentrate the source of light, maximizing light efficiency to throw its beam up to 24 miles.

A clockwork mechanism rotated the panels, producing a light flash precisely every ten seconds. The lighthouse’s signature beam continues today, flashing light from an exterior automated beacon at ten-second intervals. The fog signal was replaced by a more modern navigation aid in 1976.

The lighthouse sits on an eight-foot foundation. Its walls, four-and-a-half feet thick at the base and tapering to two feet at the top, employ structurally connected inner and outer walls that were strong enough to emerge undamaged from the 1906 San Francisco and 1989 Loma Prieta earthquakes.

RESTORATION EFFORTS

The lighthouse tower is currently closed to tours. However, the Fresnel lens is now on display in the Fog Signal Building. The California State Parks Foundation is spearheading a fundraising campaign to restore and reopen the tower to the public. For more information, visit www.calparks.org.
NATURAL HISTORY

History may be the park’s top billing, but the point’s natural beauty is also a major attraction. Its high perch provides scenic views of harbor and elephant seals and whales. During spring and winter migrations, the whales travel relatively close to the lighthouse grounds, particularly in the shallow waters of the cove south of the point. Standing on the station’s boardwalk overlook, visitors can observe northward-bound California gray whale cows and their new calves taking advantage of the safety of the cove. Farther out, the spouts of humpback and blue whales can often be seen.

About 50 species of migratory and native birds live here, including marbled murrelets, an endangered species that nests in nearby old-growth forests and feeds in coastal waters. Tide pools are a short walk north of Pigeon Point (do not disturb or remove tide pool specimens). Below the point, frothy waves washing over rock ledges cause sea palms to sway.

WHERE, WHEN AND WEATHER

Pigeon Point Light Station is approximately midway between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz, near Pescadero. The grounds are open daily from 8 a.m. to sunset. Fridays through Mondays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., weather permitting, park docents recount the light station’s rich history while leading visitors among the old buildings and around the grounds. Exhibits and a bookstore are also available to provide information to visitors.

Be prepared for unpredictable weather. Rain may fall between November and March, and even summer brings chilly fog, particularly in the mornings. Stiff northwest winds can develop anytime.

For a virtual tour of the light station and more park information, visit the Pigeon Point Light Station SHP pages at www.parks.ca.gov.

PIGEON POINT LIGHTHOUSE HOSTEL

Four Light Station buildings, converted to lodging for up to 59 people, are operated by Hostelling International. Accommodations are available in male, female, and co-ed bunkrooms, as well as private rooms for individuals, couples or families.

Hostel guests share bathrooms, kitchens and living rooms. To make reservations, call (650) 879-0633 from 7:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Information is also available at www.pigeonpointhostel.org.

ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION

The boardwalk, the Fog Signal Building exhibits and bookstore are accessible, as are parking, restrooms and the picnic area near the park entrance. For accessibility updates, call (916) 445-8949 or visit http://access.parks.ca.gov.

PLEASE REMEMBER

- Except for service animals, pets are not permitted on the lighthouse grounds.
- Smoking is not permitted in the park.
- Cliffs can collapse onto the rocks below—stay on designated pathways.

A public phone and restrooms are near the entrance to the park grounds.

NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Pescadero State Beach
  14 ½ miles south of Half Moon Bay on Highway 1 (650) 879-2170
- Año Nuevo State Park
  1 New Year’s Creek Road, off Highway 1, Pescadero 94060 (650) 879-0227/2025
- Butano State Park, 1500 Cloverdale Road, Pescadero 94060 (650) 879-2040

This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization.

For more information contact:
San Mateo Coast Natural History Ass’n.
New Years Creek Rd., Pescadero, CA 94060
www.smcnha.org